

# Thai Women: Key Players in the Country's Economic and Social Development

By

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## Abstract

The aim of this study is to analyse the economic and social role of women in the wake of the strong economic growth experienced by Thailand over the last few decades. The first section will deal with the social-cultural and historic background including the legal, religious, educational, political, social, and symbolic representation of women. The second part will look at the role played by women in the country's economic activity. Finally, the third part will analyze the effects of urbanization, industrialization, globalization, and westernization on social and family structures, and on cultural values.

## **Evolutions in Social-Cultural and Historical Factors**

Education and social conditioning generally resulted in women being ranked lower than men in Thai society. Their traditional role encompasses domestic tasks, bringing up children, and satisfying the needs of the husband when he returns home from work. The woman is a docile individual who manages the family budget. As women are conditioned to this idea of inferiority, they are more easily exposed to all kinds of exploitation. The mass media has generally encouraged this passive role of women.

## ***The Legal Status of Women***

Hindu teaching has a major influence on the unequal status of men and women, following the Hindu DHARMASASTRA and ARTGAVAVEDA codes which were adopted by Buddhist teaching. This led to the gradual adoption of the patriarchal concept by the upper classes, founded on the power and authority of the father, which resulted in a very strict caste system for women and

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encouraged polygamy, although women could not have more than one husband. It also influenced the status of children who were taught to respect the customs of their rank. During the Ayutthaya period in the 14th century, the caste system grew stronger and several types of wives were defined. These included those given by the parents (major girls), those supported by the husband (minor girls), those bought by the husband to free families from heavy debts (female slaves), and those the king gave as a reward to those who had higher status.

In accordance with the social laws and customs, women were regarded as property and were subject to the domination and protection of their husbands or other male members of the family. Rama IV introduced a new law which forbade husbands from selling their wife without her prior agreement. However, she could be sold if she were a slave. Women could also choose their own husband when they came of age. It is often noted that Thai women seem to accept their submissive role without objection although, obviously, they have always hoped to be well treated by their husbands. Rama V abolished slavery and gave women more rights. Rama VI encouraged monogamy, but this had little influence on the prevailing customs.

In 1932, with the introduction of a constitutional monarchy, polygamy was abolished but many of the disadvantages remained in place, with the law continuing to recognize men as

the head of the family, while women had to have their husband's consent to get a passport, for example. Thailand's participation, in the international entente of nations and international organizations after 1945, meant that the country had to fall in with international norms including those for women (signatory to the universal declaration of human rights in 1948).

Today, women play a key role in the country's economy. They have a better education and the laws have reflected these changes. Thus, in 1974, equal rights were established for men and women, not only to the benefit of women but also enhancing the development of the country by enabling half its population to make a full contribution, with the right to choose their home and employment, to negotiate, and to have custody of the children. Men can demand a divorce if they can prove that their wife has been unfaithful, but a woman must also prove that her husband supports and esteems another woman. In addition, there is no real sanction against bigamy. In 1975 the Thai government eliminated the restrictions which existed up till then for female lawyers, and established the right of women to travel abroad with or without their husbands. In 1978 one NESDB<sup>\*</sup> commission wrote a 20-year development plan for women,

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<sup>\*</sup> NESDB: National Economic Social Development Board - Bangkok

stipulating the same status for everybody in terms of administration, health and education, which included quantitative objectives.

Various development projects regarding the status of women have been blocked by bureaucracy and the requirement to present quantitative results (the number of women who receive training or education in the villages), reducing the guarantee of a real improvement in the quality of women's lives. It is difficult to evaluate these projects without a specific methodology and an exhaustiveness with a diversity of indicators. In order to have more transparency and more in-depth evaluation, it would be logical to entrust the development plan of women to independent non-governmental feminist organizations. A change of attitude by the male junta, namely abandoning preconceived ideas based on historical and cultural factors, would already be a considerable improvement. The National Commission for Women's Affairs, however, lacks the budget and the decision-making powers to play more than an advisory role.

In 1985, Thailand became a member of the CEDAW (Convention on Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women) and has gradually introduced specific recommendations such as equal opportunities to government and administrative posts, education, family life, marriage and in court. At the same time there have been reservations regarding certain measures in the light

of national laws, traditions and customs (army, night-work etc.), covering economic, political and social spheres. Given that most women live in rural areas, progressive change has been deemed preferable.

Every society has its own form of sex discrimination and this cannot be eradicated through legislation alone. To meet the economic/technological challenge, the specificities of each society have to be studied in the light of their history and cultural background. Social values in Thailand are based on the family, education and Buddhism. The question of cultural values and traditions is a sensitive area, although collective awareness is now developing in line with modern lifestyles. On a cultural level there is not really any gender discrimination.

### ***Buddhism and the Relationships between Men and Women***

The practice of Theravada Buddhism differs according to social class, region, ethnic group etc., but it is an essential key to Thai identity, and has had a crucial impact on the relationships between men and women in society. It provides a vision of the world, a sense of reality, and moral standards which explain many of the values in Thai society including detachment, non-violence, and tolerance. Buddhism provided a moral framework for the hierarchical pre-eminence of men. Some texts state that women cannot reach Nirvana unless

they are first reborn as a man but this sits uneasily with the Buddhist logic based on morals and ethics, and the concept of impermanency which applies to both men and women. In addition, at the highest level of karma there is neither man nor woman. Differences exist between the texts and the accepted practices and beliefs. The texts reflect the social conditions of their time in accordance with their interpretation by men but they are not considered as particularly important because knowledge of the texts is not necessary to be happy - practices change with changing circumstances, and everyone develops their own interpretation. Beauty is abstract, and physical beauty is impermanent and has no relationship with the beauty of beauty queens.

Sexual intercourse is regarded as a simple form of terrestrial attachment, and homosexual or heterosexual acts are considered as having the same level of importance. Buddhism is generally egalitarian and tolerant, and not misogynist. However, certain ideas continue to persist more or less today, and there is still a certain male domination.

### ***Education***

The lower social status of women in legal terms led to poorer education, and women found themselves with more limited opportunities as their only social role was within the family. During the Sukkhotai period, high

status women received the same education as men in literature, astronomy, astrology, and art. Ordinary women received no education, however, because the centre for education was the temple and Buddhist monks only taught men, having no direct contact with women. There are no female monks in Thailand, only nuns who have lower status than the monks, and who are given the menial household tasks to do. While monks travel free on public transport, for example, the nuns must pay their own fares. Moslem women are also more limited from a professional point of view.

During the period of king Narai (1649-1681) high society sent girls to train in the palace which was then the only institution where women could learn, but women in general received an extremely limited education (language, literature, poetry, arts, dancing etc.) It was only in 1782, during the Ratnakosin period, that women had greater educational opportunities although this was limited to the families of high society. The period was also marked by a more outward-looking attitude towards the West. Two books had a strong influence on the education of girls: "Kritsana teaches young girls" for daughters of the nobility, which attempted make them docile wives, always ready to satisfy the needs of their husband, and "Proverbs for the education of girls", published at the time of the move to a market economy, which encouraged unmarried women to be more autonomous both economically

and socially, to protect their virginity, and to avoid unwanted pregnancies (18th century). However, most of the literature during the 18th century taught girls to accept submission to their father and to teach their daughters the same.

During the reign of Rama IV (1851-1868) several improvements were introduced for women in high society, i.e. female foreign missionaries and the wives of foreign missionaries were allowed to teach the young girls in court and for the first time women could go abroad for their education. The first woman professor was Princess

Pichitjirabha who founded the well-known Rajini School for girls. Under the reign of Rama V, the queen agreed to the increasing demand that girls have the opportunity to receive the same education as boys, not to compete with their male counterparts but to prepare girls to educate their children better. Women started to go to university in 1927 following the creation of the Chulalongkorn University. In 1932, western style education was encouraged. However, in 1952 only a small percentage of girls were eligible to continue their education after primary school in comparison with boys.

#### **Literacy rate for 15-24 year olds**

	Men	Women
1990	97.8%	98.4%
2000	97.8%	98.1%

#### **Level of education in 2000**

Level	% women/total	% female pop distribution
Primary school	51.4%	66.7%
Secondary school	46.8%	24.3%
Higher education degrees	45.5%	2.3%
First degree (Bachelor)	54.6%	6.3%
Master and Doctorate	44.4%	0.4%

Source: 1990-2000 Population and Housing Census – Statistical Tables – National Statistics Office.

The rate of literacy for women was approximately 60% in 1960, then 91% compared with 95% for men in 2000. It should be noted that the current rates of literacy are stable at around

98% and were more or less the same for men and women between 1990 and 2000. Concerning the level of education, the percentage of girls in the various levels of education is similar to that of

boys, with over 44% in postgraduate degree courses, and nearly 55% in bachelor degree courses, illustrating the equal opportunities available for both sexes. 9% of the female population have a university education, and 25% have the equivalent to A level, which is similar for the population as a whole. In 2002, female students accounted for 48.5% of the total number. Teaching is more teacher-based than student-based and concentrates on the transmission of knowledge, rather than on developing analytical and critically-minded individuals, factors which are more highly developed in adult training courses. Education is not underpinned by realities, social aspects, or women's right but is characterized by an approach based on traditional roles. Education should instil three qualities in women according to Suteera Thomson (Women reshaping the society: A challenge – 1995 UNESCO Report: a challenge – 1995 UNESCO Report ): i.e. the capacity to influence their living conditions and look after themselves, to be aware of their equal rights to education, employment, politics and status, and the possibility to be agents of social change thanks to the media, development programmes, education, and better representation in decision-making organisations.

Informal adult education is very varied and provides an alternative for illiterate people or those who cannot have access to formal education, which is important for women, particularly in rural areas. The Ministry of Agriculture

has developed several training schemes and there are also a number of televised programmes. However, the general level of education for adult women in the countryside remains rather low overall.

### ***Politics***

Women have enjoyed a significant political role at certain periods during the course of Thailand's history. In the 13th century a woman ruled the kingdom of Lamphun, then three other women ruled this kingdom during the 16th century. However, these situations were due more to the circumstances than to the prevailing laws and customs, because the role of women from the upper classes was generally limited to religious practice and forming political alliances. The political culture developed by men, intentionally or otherwise, and the need for a family life and the upkeep of the household, kept women away from politics.

The arrival of a constitutional monarchy in 1932 brought with it the right to vote for women and the possibility to stand for election, although this did not result in a significant number of female politicians. Those who did stand for election were generally the wives of political leaders, in particular Chinese-Thai women (it is generally felt by the Chinese more than by the Thais that one can only really have confidence in one's family). However the trend is upward. The first woman was elected to Parliament in

1949, with 9 women elected in 1979, and 15 in 1992 (see tables below). With the 1992 elections, women accounted for 50.62% of all eligible voters and 50.82% of actual voters (Women in decision-making positions: politics and administration – Suteera Thomson – Conference United Nations 1995 p.8 – Department of Local Bangkok Administration).

#### Women elected as MPs

Years	Number of women elected	Percentage of women elected
1952	4	3.25
Feb. 1957	1	0.6
Dec. 1957	4	2.5
1969	7	3.19
1975	3	1.12
1976	7	2.5
1979	9	2.99
1983	13	4.01
1986	12	3.26
1988	10	2.8
March 1992	12	3.33
Sept. 1992	15	4.17
1995	24	6.14
1996	22	5.6

Source: Suteera Thompson, *Women working towards power and decision-making* (in Thai), Bangkok, 2541 [1998], p. 6; Ratthasaphasan (Government Review), numbers 24 (5), May 2519 and 27 (6), May 2522; *Deli niu*, January 12 [2001]

#### Female candidates for seats in Parliament by region in the July'95 Election

Total	227
Bangkok	42
Northeast	89
South	9
Central	60
North	27

#### Level of Educational Attainment Female Candidates in the July'95 Election

Educational Level	Percentage
Doctoral Degree	3.08
Masters Degree	7.92
Bachelor	42.73
Diploma	3.08
Vocational	4.84
Upper secondary	20.26
Primary	9.69
Other	0.88
Total	99.96

#### Profession of Female Candidates in the July'95 Election

Profession	Percentage
Lawyer	2.64
Politician	11.45
Employee	25.55
Business	44.05
Farmer	6.60
Former civil servants	2.20
Other	7.48
Total	99.97

Source: Gender and Development Research Institute, derived from the Department of Local Administration, Ministry of the Interior

**Politics and Administration (1995) at national and local levels**  
**Percentage of women**

<b>National Government</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Members of Parliament <sup>1</sup>	6.1
Senators <sup>1</sup>	3.3
Cabinet <sup>2</sup>	2.0
Judges <sup>3</sup>	14.6
Attorney <sup>4</sup>	10.8
Civil Servant Executives: <sup>5</sup>	
Permanent secretary	4.2
Director General	5.7
Deputy Director General	16.7
Provincial Government <sup>6</sup>	
Provincial Governor	1.3
District Officers	0
Deputy District Officers	10.5
Elected Local Government <sup>6</sup>	
Provincial Council Members	4.9
Municipality Council Members	6.0
Sub-District Heads	1.1
Village Heads	1.6

- Source: <sup>1</sup> Registration Division, The Secretariat of the National Assembly, Bangkok  
<sup>2</sup> Office of the Permanent Secretary, The Prime Minister's Office, Bangkok  
<sup>3</sup> Office of Judicial Affairs, Ministry of Justice, Bangkok  
<sup>4</sup> Office of the Attorney-General, Bangkok  
<sup>5</sup> Office of the Permanent Secretary, The Prime Minister's Office, Bangkok  
<sup>6</sup> Department of the Local Administration, Ministry of Interior, Bangkok

**Civil Servants level 7 and up (%)**

<b>Government Agency</b>	<b>1985</b>	<b>1994</b>
	Female	Female
Department of Foreign Trade	31.4	50.7
Public Works Department	3.1	8.0
Department of Corrections	9.0	16.0
Department of Public Welfare	20.9	59.7
Department of Non-formal Education	18.6	53
Department of Mineral Resources	12.2	20.3
Department of industrial Works	3.2	15.8
The Secretariat of the Prime Minister	19.4	27.8

Source: Bureau of Personnel Policy development and Research, Office of the Civil Service Commission, The Prime Minister's Office, Bangkok



**Percentage of Judges and Attorneys by sex (1995)**

<b>Level</b>	<b>Female</b>
<u>Judges</u> <sup>1</sup>	
Level 1-6 (bore)	14.8
Level 7-9 (bore)	-
<u>Attorneys</u> <sup>2</sup>	
Level 1-5 (bore)	9.5
Level 6-8 (bore)	-

Source: Office of Judicial Affairs, Ministry of Justice, Bangkok Office of the Attorney-General, Bangkok

In responses to surveys, women appear to be more reactive than men, showing that they are not apolitical. At the time of the elections in 1995, 227 candidates were registered on the political lists of the 12 parties, with candidates of all ages from every region, level of education, profession etc. A large number were businesswomen, and there were some well-known profiles, i.e. families of politicians. These elections resulted in 24 women winning seats to Parliament, i.e. 6.1% of MPs (see tables below).

In 1975 a government decree permitted women to take a leadership role in the villages and sub-districts. In the wake of the convention of the 1985 CEDAW, the ban on becoming a deputy officer has recently been lifted, following a period of adaptation. Today women may truly be regarded as politically active, although the decision-making power and control of political levers still remain largely in the hands of men. Their role in national and local political life remains limited and there

are still few women with key roles in political parties or government, or at the head of administrations, even though the proportion of female personnel is over 50% in the majority of ministries. In central administration there is no discrimination against women in terms of promotion to administrative posts, but in practice their promotion is slower, even if their numbers have increased considerably. In the same way in administrative posts such as the National Statistics Office, few women are found at decision-making level. 'A woman's place is in the home' still remains a dominant social value, especially in rural areas. The number of women in positions of power remains low but is constantly growing as their capacities are recognized. However, they need more opportunities at all levels of society to optimize their position in politics and public administration. Women won around 50 seats (approximately 10% of the seats) during the 2001 elections. Sudarat Keyuraphan, who became an MP in 1992 and was re-elected 4 times, was

named Minister of Health in 2001 under the Thaksin government.

The Thai mentality sees politics as a game not a real long-term commitment, providing prestige, status, and advantages but with certain risks. The title of MP gives status and privileges in the social hierarchy together with increased influence, and allows economic interests to be protected. Women in politics represent a new hope, determined, they convey a much more positive and less corrupt image on the political scene.

### ***The Thai Nation and the Representation of the Woman***

The absence of colonial wars and colonization, compared to other countries in South East Asia provided a stronger maintenance of the local social, political, economic and cultural structures as well as the absence of independence movements and the virtual absence of feminist movements until very recently. The national identity was reinforced with the pushing back of the borders during the 19th century in order to protect sovereignty of the country. At this time women were expected to transmit the national values to their children. During the Phibun government (1938-1944 and 1948-1957) nationalism was supposed to protect Thai culture from Western influence, until the moment when the West protected Thailand from Communism. The traditions (smiling, dancing, clothes, floral decoration, food

presentation...) gave an attractive image of women, allowing pollution and poverty to be forgotten.

During the years 1970-1976, the democratic movement and student activism were not focused on the problem of the equality of women. The improvement in the living conditions of women in poor rural areas is a significant element in the plan for women's development (1998-2001).

Feminist movements fell into bureaucratic speeches of project management and seminars, apart from the difficulties women in rural medium have to take part in forums and present their claims. In the years 1980-1990, various feminist NGOs developed, influenced by the international feminist movement and focusing on prostitution, AIDS, health and the environment; but they are sometimes disconnected from cultural realities, and use a conflictual anti-male language. Is Thai feminism a viable concept in the Thai female movement? No, because the social context is different from that of Western countries, and urban middle class women feel free, regarding men more as guides than as authoritarian dominators. The female movements fight initially for the female condition (nutrition, wellbeing, family planning, modernization of agriculture), but are often transitory, because they are dominated by women belonging to the dominant class. Rural women who manage the household and work with men, and taking part in the family

decisions have played a significant role in the development of the country.

The women often take part in social protest movements, whether they are from rural or working-class families, concerning the environment, politics, infrastructure projects, or protests not based on the inequality of the sexes. Often they succeed better in negotiations with governmental authorities as they are more flexible, more diplomatic, and more realistic than men. Initially, they negotiate at local level to resolve local problems as they are the guarantors of the stability of the villages, and they gradually develop to the level of negotiation with the provincial and then the national authorities.

### ***The Traditional Family***

While some consider that Thai society is patriarchal, others believe that the position of women is very strong. Brahman philosophies and traditions from the Indian sub-continent and Confucians from the Chinese world have had a major impact on Thai culture, in terms of the patriarchate. During the Ayutthaya period, the system of drudgery meant the men were away from their villages for several weeks at a time, and the women dealt with the family and developed small businesses during this absence in order to improve their financial independence. In the North-East, the women form the basic element of the household through

whom the transmission of goods is regulated.

The western influence involved the development of the “broken” family and that of the monogamy, which became the law, polygamy becoming very rare for economic reasons and of succession. This influence also led to the validation of marriages by certificates, and the transmission of the name of the father to the children, the identification of a head of family facilitating the administrative control of the populations. This reinforced the patriarchal concept of authority, namely the power of the father over the mother and children, especially in urban populations and the upper classes, while the system which exists in rural areas is less rigid.

The rights and obligations of individuals are initially defined starting from the family context, and the role of women is to transmit these values and attitudes to their family, by also passing on to their children the concept of their equal rights with men, even if the perception remains that the central role in the family home always belongs to the woman. The girls do housework not demanded from boys, but they help also their father. Women have social, economic and religious activities, the activities within a village community requiring community co-operation and values.

## **The Role of Women in the Economic Development**

### ***The Thai Development Model***

We have to remember that in 1857, in order to maintain its independence, Thailand partially opened up to the world market and this eventually led to western influence. The Thai economic miracle of the last few decades is based largely on the participation and exploitation of women, who produce most of the industrial value, an aspect which is not developed by many studies. This development intensified the differences between the areas, the social classes, the sexes and privileged urbanization. The economic development model is based on patriarchal capitalism, the market economy, globalisation with the opening of the borders to trade and foreign investments, the reduction in the role of the government limited to major macroeconomic equilibrium, an industry and an agriculture initially turned towards export, the importation of raw materials and goods of equipment, the development of tourism and services as a significant source of income.

**The export industry** requires a non qualified and cheap labour force (electronic assembly, textiles, food preserves, jewellery, electrical appliances, shoes etc.) These manufacturing industries which produce high added value to exports are due to a mainly female labour force,

thus in the top ten export sectors, a very clear majority of the labour force is female with wages sometimes close to subsistence level depending on the qualifications. International competition, in parallel to technological progress, means that the capital factor is more and more important compared to the work factor which requires a more qualified and less important labour force, but with the need for a stagnating volume of non qualified and cheap labour without possibility to really evolve, a need satisfied by a female labour force readily available on the labour market.

**For agriculture**, it is absurd to say that housework is the only role of women especially in the countryside. They have always worked side by side with their husbands in the fields and thus have a significant economic role in agriculture. The statistics tend not to consider the 'housewives' in the labour force, even though they have always contributed to the development of the society (housework, clothing, agricultural work). In a great number of rural families where the standard of living is low (and more especially in the North East), a great number of women, who do both the housework and work in the fields are not paid, and are therefore registered in the informal sector. However this phenomenon is worsened by an agricultural sector where as in the export industry, the capital/work ratio increases, which supports the land speculation and leads to a demand for work higher than the

supply. This has led to migration towards the cities, particularly Bangkok given the need for labour in industry, tourism, business, and the services. In rural areas, women need technology, know-how, money for projects, training, and marketing. In addition, the local institutions traditionally support single women.

**Women working in the services, trade, tourism, education, and the pharmaceutical sector** are more numerous than men and also play a significant role in these fields in the economic development of the country. The development of the Western concept of beauty has led to the tendency to turn women into consumer objects, and to the development of sexual contacts outside marriage. The Vietnam war followed by tourism fostered the development of a cottage industry of sexual services, and the female population formed a significant source of foreign currency. A large number of women also emigrated as cleaning ladies to the Middle-East and Japan, but this phenomenon has decreased considerably.

***Poor Protection on the Labour Market and Low Qualified Jobs for Non-Managerial Staff***

Migration towards the cities has resulted in more fragile populations in terms of recruitment conditions, means of defence in the face of ill treatment, and the future of their children who remain in the village or the countryside

with the less lucky ones populating the shantytowns. Moreover, they are poorly protected by the labour laws, the poor safety measures in the factories and are more affected by industrial accidents. A labour law in 1972 states that employer must fix the same wages and holidays for a similar job, in terms of duration and level, whether the employee is man or woman. Certain laws have been introduced to protect female workers. Dangerous work, working in the mines, night-work (bars and massages) for women under 18, and working from midnight until six o'clock in the morning, except in certain cases, are prohibited.

The majority of women remain employed in low qualified jobs in agriculture or industry. In the north and the south women work mostly in agriculture, and in the central area in 'small businesses and the service sector, while in the north east homework is common such as weaving. The majority of women do not have real economic power. Women are often considered not so much as independent but rather as dependent on men and easy to manipulate, dissatisfied, and jealous. However, in management, especially for foreign companies, women are considered as better workers because they are generally more motivated, harder-working, and more flexible because of the need for financial independence, and more stable because they know who they are and where they are going. At the same time, they are also more discerning. Men, on

the other hand, are considered to be more unstable and prefer to work for themselves. In a great number of manufacturing industries and services, foreign managers work more easily with female personnel.

### ***Wages, Responsibilities, Promotions***

Today women are beginning to share economic responsibility like men and have access to all forms of education, and may be found in every sector from social workers and taxi drivers to nurses, soldiers, pilots, engineers, professors, doctors, managers, businesswomen, members of political parties etc. However, while women are very often regarded as equal to men in the manufacturing industry, the services, administration, and business, especially at the moment of recruitment, in terms of wages, responsibilities and promotions, the chances of concretely moving up the ladder will be slower depending on sectors. On the other hand, equal opportunities in foreign firms are more real. In the trade unions, as in the administration and politics, women are few and far between in executive posts, and leadership often remains male because the women have family responsibilities which make the tasks of organizing meetings more difficult. Conversely, there are an increasing

number of success stories of women managers in Bangkok, such as Wannipa (41 years old, managing director for care products in a multinational firm, who energetically manages her time in several areas, working during the week and looking after family and children at the weekend) or Nalinee (45 years old, doctor, who did not have time for her family in the past following a divorce, and who today is gaily managing her time between her family and her work as president of a cosmetics company)(Bangkok Post, February 2004)

### **Industrialization, Urbanization, Globalization have Led to Profound Family and Social Changes**

In urban environment the family structures are generally patriarchal (male head of family providing an income for the other members of the family – housewives deal with domestic tasks) as long as the income of the father is sufficient, but precarious living conditions have pushed women to find work outside the home to bring in complementary incomes, in parallel to the industrialization which fostered the phenomenon.

**Economically active population of 15 years and over – by sex in 2000**

<b>Profession</b>	<b>women</b>	<b>Distribution of the number of women in %</b>
Legislators, executives and managers	35.7	3.6
Liberal professions	57.9	5.8
Technicians and associated professions	48.1	2.3
Office workers	59.3	2.9
Service workers, sales assistants, market sellers	61.9	12.3
Agricultural/fishing workers	49.1	51.7
Manual trades, craft industry	39.2	5
Fitters, assemblers, operators (industry)	32.5	3.6
Other (military, unskilled work)	45.5	12.8
<b>Professional status</b>		
Employers, owners	29.8	1
Self-employed workers	31.5	21.2
Civil servants etc.	41.1	7.9
Private sector	46	23.7
Family business	71.2	45.1
<b>Economic sector</b>		
Agriculture, hunting and forestry	49.5	55.2 *
Fishing	27.8	0.7
Mines and quarries	29.3	0.1
Manufacturing industry	53.6	10 *
Electricity, gas, water	14.9	0.1
Construction	20.7	1.3
Wholesale and retail, repair of vehicles	53.7	12.9 *
Hotel and catering	61.1	3 *
Transport and communications	14	0.7
Finance	49.2	0.8
Real estate, hiring	43.3	0.8
Public administration	27.3	1.9
Education	56.7	3.8 *
Health and social services	69	1.8 *
Other community and social activities	50.8	3.4 *
Domestic employees	82.7	1.1 *

Source: Population and Housing Census 200 – Statistical (Tables 6-7-8), National Statistical Office

\* Trades with mainly female population

### ***The Problem of Migration to Urban Areas***

The family structures have been seriously weakened following domestic responsibilities in addition to paid work for women – emigration to industrial centres leading to separation with the father – education entrusted to the grandparents – disintegration of the families with broken family ties and the extended family which enabled each family to ensure its own survival - reduction in mutual assistance and assistance provided by the village, money substituting the family and land ties - solidarity networks becoming weaker especially in urban areas – a significant number old women without marketable skills.

The urban destinations differ depending on the village, based on the employment of the first migrants who help the others to find similar work. In certain villages, few housewives have never lived in Bangkok and many of the young girls now spend some time working in the capital. This migration provides the chance for a new life, the pleasure of discovering a new world filled with new attractions, the acquisition of independence thanks to money they can earn, personal autonomy, a new culture, and greater authority. They acquire financial control and autonomy by learning how and when to spend their money.

The sense of moral and economic obligations towards the family is also a

source of tension and anxiety for these young women, as well as their long-term vulnerability for a certain number (low wages, low status, no job security) so they seek a compromise in order to provide for their personal needs, preserve their autonomy, and have access to a modern lifestyle while preserving the family ties. They regularly send money to the family, but given their daily needs for everyday life and the level of their wages, these contributions are sometimes episodic, unless their parents request money for specific needs. Overall, this money sent to families in the provinces is much more significant than the funds from the various governmental development programmes.

This has introduced a new dynamic in the relations with the parents. The young people return to the village with new standards of prestige and authority, which leads to specific conflicts with the parents who see their authority disputed. The young people want to extricate themselves from the too heavy family obligations even if they continue to help their parents during the monsoon and take part in domestic tasks. While the parents accept the attraction of the urban wages and the hope for a better life for their children, they also hope for gratitude, respect, a contribution to the income, and a material contribution to the housework and in the fields in return.

After this experience of urban life, a majority return to the village, in



particular at the moment of marriage, but at a later age, while a minority chooses not to marry. A young woman travelling alone and migrating to the town is suspected of losing her virtue. The parents are more anxious for their daughters, especially if they become sexually experienced, because they can no longer negotiate a marriage dowry. Some who have lost their employment prefer to return to the village to become nuns, teachers, or to work in humanitarian associations, rather than returning to the fields and submission with all the family obligations. Those who know about the dangers to health inherent in the sex industry sometimes prefer to leave anyway, knowing that if they earn money they will return with a better status and financial security, considering that they have nothing to lose because they do not have a future in their village if they come back to live there.

There has been an exodus of young people to the city, for the following reasons: a long period of schooling, television which relays the cultural attractions of urban life, the example of their elder sisters or brothers, the problems of life in the villages, the desire not to work in the fields or the home, and a lack of prospects.

### ***The Problem of Female Home Workers***

Historically working at home has been common practice for over a

thousand years. Working with silk was a hobby for women, but it did not represent a significant economic activity because it was mainly for personal use. Positively, the development of a modular domestic industry makes it possible for the women not to leave the village and to increase the family income while continuing to manage the domestic tasks and the children's upbringing, making it possible to largely maintain the traditional model of the extended family, because without the assistance provided by the women, the majority of families would have difficult surviving, as the majority of women are responsible for the family budget.

Often classified under the heading of the informal economy, work from the home was encouraged by successive development plans in order to encourage the creation of micro companies and subcontracting for large firms. These home workers, located both in the country (approximately two-thirds) and the town, work for the food, artificial flowers, clothing, woodcarving, shoe, lacquer, silk, and umbrella sectors and are mainly women.

This low qualified work is characterized by long working days, wages lower than those of the formal sector, fluctuating work opportunities according to the orders, no Social Security cover, and no labour law protection. However, it also provides a certain number of advantages as there is no direct supervision, no factory rule

constraints, no control etc. During the monsoon period they tend to go back to their agricultural activities and move to town during periods when there is little work available where they can find temporary employment with better wages.

As we noted earlier, a model based on an export industrialization strategy requires low cost production. The current increase in international competition should strengthen this practice, taking into account the factors specific to Thailand: continuation of growth based on a largely export industry, growth in domestic demand given the opening of the borders in parallel with integration with O.M.C. and ASEAN, the working conditions analyzed above, a large number of partially unemployed workers in the countryside and also in the cities, the need for an increasingly qualified labour force for the formal sector. In addition, this is likely to reinforce the present social-economic situation, namely working hard to gain an adequate income and the lack of simple work for poorly educated workers, the latter not having the funds to start their own "business".

The living conditions of certain domestic workers in Bangkok, according to Nakumol Nirathorn of Thammasat University, illustrated in a study entitled "The Plight of Women Homeworkers" remains very low. Housing is provided by renting a few square meters without running water,

payment of electricity depends on the number of household appliances, and toilets are shared by several families. Health facilities are scarce (use of the three Bangkok Metropolitan Administration health centres which are cheap public hospitals), and the level of education is poor (the BMA schools offer free primary education, but the pupils must buy their own uniforms and books, although for the poorest families the pupils are entitled to free uniforms, books and lunch). Concerning consumer credit, buying on credit from the local grocers is interest-free and is generally on a weekly basis although the amount allowed depends on the credit of the purchaser, while loans against security are very cheap and are often used to buy television sets, hi-fi systems etc. On the other hand, loans outside the banking circuit involve exorbitant interest rates of around 20% monthly, sometimes on a daily repayment basis.

#### Number of Homeworkers by Sex and Location

	1999		2002	
	In thousands	%	In thousands	%
<b>Total</b>	309.2	100	592.2	100
<b>Men</b>	61.8	20	129.4	21.8
<b>Women</b>	247.4	80	462.8	78.2
<b>Urban areas</b>	64.1	20.7	171.6	29
<b>Non-urban areas</b>	245.1	79.3	420.6	71

Source: Home Work Survey – National Statistical Office (T.D.I 2003 – Table 29)

### **Working Population by Sex**

	<b>1991</b>	<b>1995</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2002</b>
<b>Men</b>	87.7	83.5	80.6	81.5
<b>Women</b>	74.5	68.9	64.9	65.6

Source: Labor Force Survey- N.S.O. – ((Quarter 3 – Table 22 – Thailand Development Indicators 2003)

### **Rate of Unemployment by Sex - 15-24-Year Olds**

	<b>1991</b>		<b>1995</b>		<b>1998</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2001</b>	<b>2002</b>
	<b>Quarter</b>		<b>Quarter</b>		<b>Quarter</b>	<b>Quarter</b>	<b>Quarter</b>	<b>Quarter</b>
	<b>1</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Men</b>	7.9	3.9	5	2.3	13.2	7	8.8	5.9
<b>Women</b>	7.3	4.7	4.1	2.3	10.2	6	6.9	5.6

Source: Labor Survey – N.S.O. – (Tab. 23-24-25)

### **Number of Thai Employees Working Abroad**

	1999		2002		% development
	Number	Distribution	Number	Distribution	
Total	202416		157624		-22%
Middle East	6001	3	7382	4.7	+23%
Israel	11940	5.9	12458	7.9	+4.3%
Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei	49898	24.7	36697	23.3	-26.5%
Hong Kong	4339	2.1	4904	3.1	+13%
Japan	5278	2.6	4453	2.8	-15.6%
Taiwan	115096	56.9	78365	5	-32%
Korea	1871	1	2344	1.5	+25.3%
Far East	176482	87.2	126763	80.4	-28.2%
Other countries	8593	4.2	11021	7	+28.3%

Source: Department of Employment, Ministry of Labour

### Labour Force in % (Quarter 4) (2002)

	Men	Women
Labour force	60.4	48.3
Other people	14.4	27.4
People -15 years	25.2	24.3

Source: National Statistical Office, Ministry of Information and Communication

### Migration in 2002

% female population migrant/% female labour force	11.4%
% male population migrant/% male labour force	13.9%
Compared to the total of the migrant labour force (% female population)	45.9%

### *Environmental Problems*

The high growth rate of the last few decades has led to environmental deterioration, in particular regarding the natural resources in rural areas and the quality of urban life. A number of prevention campaigns have therefore been set up. In rural areas, women have a close relationship with the environment, because as they are in charge of the community's economic activity, they try to preserve the environment and transmit attitudes for safeguarding the environment to their children. They manage the conservation of the natural resources better than the men because of their specific roles and because they are the first victims of environmental pollution. The environmental problems they have to deal with include deforestation, soil erosion, water pollution, chemical pollution with pesticides, because they

are responsible for getting the water, wood, seeds, and food. This means they have to walk further to find these resources not to mention the risk of poor food quality which could lead to diseases such as diarrhoeas

As for the 'urban' women their problems include food supplies and sanitation, and they must cope with air (smoke, radioactivity, microwaves...), water, and noise pollution which means they must spend more time doing the house work, looking after the children and travelling. The increasing pollution can lead to respiratory problems, bronchitis, cancer, pneumonia, problems for pregnant women such as deformities of the foetus, a fall in the fertility rate, physical malformations, delayed birth, psychological disorders, and children who are more sensitive to pollution.

### **Health and General Conditions of Life**

Overall the health and living conditions for women are positive. The reports present positive quantitative indexes: a clear improvement in life expectancy, improved levels of literacy and education for both sexes, and improved health conditions, but access to health differs depending on the areas, thus the infant mortality rate is higher in the North-East than in Bangkok according to Peter Bell (Thailand's economic miracle built on the backs of women – ChiangMai Conference 1996). The situation for women in Thailand is better than in the majority of ASEAN countries, apart from Singapore and Malaysia, in terms of infant mortality rate, health, education, employment, responsibilities in the economic and social life, and freedom of movement. Moreover, it has the highest rate of women in the labour force. In addition, women acquired the right to vote before all the other ASEAN countries. Compared to other Asian countries (China, India, Moslem ASEAN countries), Thai women have remained freer, more visible, more mobile, and more active. But as we saw previously, poverty and inequality persist in spite of the phenomenon of industrialisation/globalization.

### **Population Growth**

Years	Population growth rate	Size of households
1960	3.15	5.6
1970	2.7	5.7
1980	2.65	5.2
1990	1.96	4.4
2000	1.05	3.9

Source: National Statistical Office

### **Percentage of population doing sport**

Years	Men	Women	Total
1992	31.8	19.7	25.7
2001	36.3	23.1	29.6

Source: Asking only Exercise Persons – National Statistical Office – Health and Welfare Survey 2001

### **Life Expectancy**

Years	Men	Women
1991	67.7	72.4
2000	71.1	76.1

Source: Survey – National Statistical Office – Thailand Development Indicators 2003

### **People affected by AIDS**

	2001	2002
Total	22977	16814
women in %.	33.7	35.3

Source: Office of the Permanent Secretary for Public Health, Ministry of Public Health

### Living Conditions (in %)

	1990	2000
Death rate per married woman from 15 to 49 years	2.36	1.88
Female heads of household	19.4	26.2
Homes built with non-permanent materials	9.4	7.1
House owners	87.4	82.4
Homes with sanitation	86.1	97.8
Homes with running water	80.3	92.6
Households cooking with gas or electricity	38.9	65.6
Households with television	67.9	90.6

Source: Key indicators, Population and Census 1990 and 2000 – N.S.O, Bangkok

A middle class model has developed adopting western consumerism, an urban lifestyle marked by greater stress, new consumer needs fed by publicity, a distortion of family ties, a second job in the catering industry for example, an increase in the divorce rate and the number of abandoned children, a decrease in the number of marriages, and widespread sexual intercourse before marriage

In addition, women are more affected by AIDS which has increased sharply over the last 10 years, and which could increase the death rate, although the situation now seems to have stabilized. Government organizations and associations have launched aid programmes for families and patients who lose their friends and close relations, but the families themselves are increasingly looking

after the patients in the final stages as well as the children of the deceased parents.

### Conclusion

This economic, social, and cultural development should continue in the coming years, but we should not forget that in spite of the standardization effects of the dominant economic system, on the one hand the Thai people have preserved their fundamental cultural values (Buddhism, the relationship with time, harmonious relations, respect for others, traditional cooking), while on the other hand Thai women are increasingly equal to men in a context where harmony is primordial. You cannot manage a team of Thai female colleagues in the same way as you manage a team of French female colleagues.

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